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## Bethlehem all year round

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# Holy family, refugee family

Bernadette Gasslein

**T**he picture changes quickly — perhaps more quickly than normal this year — as Sunday nips at the heels of Christmas Day, and ushers in a new scene that doesn't find its way onto Christmas cards. The family that had just received eminent visitors from the East flees Herod's political oppression, taking with them their precious child. The back-story is told later in the week: Herod's killing frenzy will slaughter the toddlers and babies under two. If we listen carefully, we can hear the cries of the women that echo over the centuries as their children are slaughtered, raped, or turned into child soldiers: Auschwitz, Cambodia, Darfur, Bosnia, Armenia, Rwanda ...

Rarely do we think of the "Holy Family" as a refugee family. Pius XII, however, articulated this reality clearly: "The émigré Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, is the archetype of every refugee family. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien, and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land ..."

Some of these people never make it to a safe haven. Others languish for years in refugee camps. Others are exploited in their bid to seek refuge. Others do make it to safe shores, where again they face a whole series of challenges: language, culture, education, employment, building a network of relationships.

## We are all of immigrant and refugee stock

Recently we have seen emerging in Canada a hostile attitude towards refugees and immigrants. We seem to have forgotten that we are, all of us, with the exception of Canada's aboriginal peoples, of immigrant and refugee stock. Whether our ancestors fled the potato famine in Ireland, whether they came from France with Jacques Cartier seeking a life of adventure in the "New World", whether they escaped the crushing poverty of the Ukraine to homestead in the Prairies, whether they came from China to build the railroads, from Italy to work in our industrial heartland, from Vietnam to escape its communist regime, from Central America's wars or from Pakistan as economic migrants; whether rich or poor, Canadians today are all [the children of] immigrants and refugees who have found a new home in Canada.

Our forbears struggled, learned new ways, and offered to their children and grandchildren opportunities to build their

When the song of the angels is stilled  
when the star in the sky is gone  
when the kings and magi are home  
when the shepherds are with their flocks  
the work of Christmas begins —  
To find the lost  
To heal the broken  
To feed the hungry  
To bring peace  
To release the prisoner  
To rebuild the nations  
To recognize one another as  
NEIGHBOUR

*Scarboro Missions*

lives in safety and prosperity. A few brought with them conflicts from “the old country”, but the vast majority have become generous, contributing citizens who have endured hardship that most of us could not imagine, let alone cope with. Now established in safety, those same people have supported government policies that offered more generous assistance to people, who, like them, come to our shores and airports to start their lives anew.

### **Holy family — refugee family**

Does our “Christmas story” include the Holy Family as a refugee family? The mystery of the Incarnation celebrates the reality that humanity’s maker became human, a humanity that embraces human beings of every race and nation. Christ’s blood is “shed for all” (Eucharistic Prayer). From the circumstances of his birth to every aspect of his public ministry, we consistently recognize Jesus’ identification with the littlest and the least. “As long as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

Jesus’ identification with all of suffering humanity urges us — no, commits us — who share his name to the task of recognition: of recognizing in all of Earth’s suffering peoples the face of Jesus, their brother. By extension, we are called to recognize, not only in individuals, but also in entire families, the archetypal refugee family, the Holy Family, and to offer them the same hospitality we would offer to Christ.

### **Each of us is a human person**

This challenges our ability to see the “other”, not as an enemy or a threat to national security, but as people in whom we see the face of Christ, “who are called to one and the same destiny, which is divine.” And to whom the Holy Spirit offers “the possibility of being partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.” Given the fear-mongering rhetoric in some media these days, it can be difficult to sustain this way of seeing the world. But each of these children, men and women, however young or old, of whatever race, nation or culture, is a human person whose dignity and human rights we are called to defend, in the name of Christ, and in the name of the Church — regardless of their religion. *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, continues: “They also have a claim on our respect and charity that think and act differently from us in social, political and religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through kindness and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them.”

In the past year that began with the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti, we have seen many more people asking to come to our country to begin their lives over. Let us remember that holy refugee family and welcome them as they knock at our doors today. ■

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# When God is a child

Iona MacLean



**W**e met her in a village called Santa Marta in El Salvador. She was about four years old. She had been born in a refugee camp in Honduras and had lived there most of her life. A few months before our visit, she and her family and several hundred other people had finally been allowed back into their own country from which they had fled because of the war and government terrorism. They were starting from scratch to rebuild their community in an environment still poisoned by violence, fear and poverty. Yet, for all the horrors and hardship these people had suffered, they welcomed us.

The leaders of the village told us their story. Their words and the white flag flying above the village expressed the desire to live in peace. As we were shown around, a group of old men played guitars. The women were bathing their children in the stream or cooking over open fires. The people gathered for Mass, a rare and precious event because priests had such difficulty getting permission from the military to visit the community.

But of all the memories of that day in Santa Marta more than twenty years ago, the clearest and most moving is of that

little girl — born a refugee, born into poverty and uncertainty, witness to the worst that humans can do.

Yet there she was, watching us with curiosity and seemingly without fear, smiling shyly when asked if we could take her picture. A vulnerable child in the midst of overwhelming and frightening circumstances, she nevertheless gave us a “garland instead of ashes,” to use Isaiah’s words [Isa. 61:3], beautifying her surroundings and our lives.

## **It is profoundly important that God comes among us as a child.**

We see a child and we marvel at their vulnerability and dependency. We know that what we do in the present will affect the child in the future. Whether the children in our own family or the children of the world, they need love and safety, food and shelter, education and peace in order to grow. Children who are brutalized by war, domestic violence or extreme need often become brutal, abusive, or irresponsible adults continuing the destructive cycle. If we can provide a protective, loving and nurturing environment for children everywhere, we go a long way toward the peaceful world God intends.

## **A child makes us think of new beginnings and touches us with hope.**

How do we worship a God who is revealed as a little one? What change happens within us if we pray with all our hearts and minds to a God who identifies with us even in our smallest state, vulnerable and fragile, needing love and tenderness?

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
No hands but yours,  
No feet but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion  
is to look out to the earth.  
Yours are the feet by which he is to go about doing good.  
Yours are the hands by which he is to bless us now.

**St Teresa of Avila**





# Baby girl

Brian Joel, Lay Spiritan

First comes the false labour that has us scurrying home from an overnight visit to her parents. Then comes the real labour about a week later and we are scrambling, never really ready enough for the urgency the situation demands. The contractions are coming regularly now and the pains are as hot as she remembered with the first two.

It would take the better part of an hour to organize the kids, grab the emergency bag and wait for the babysitter before heading off to the hospital. It doesn't go as smoothly as during the rehearsal; it rarely does.

We arrive at 7:00 pm and when we settle in the room she lets out a little groan followed by a scream. The contractions are more frequent and more painful now, but the examination shows that we have to wait some more. Despite the pain she refuses the epidural insisting on a natural birth. They're professional, but it is evident that in our culture no one is comfortable with a screaming woman about to deliver.

The doctors want to go for a coffee break. The nurses urge us to accept the epidural before the anesthesiologist leaves for the day. The epidural is refused a second time. They offer laughing gas; the mask on her face makes her claustrophobic; she swats it away with a swiftness that stuns everyone in the room.

At this stage, the nurse is pleading with me to accept the epidural. Don't ask me; I'm not the one in pain.

It's a struggle but our baby eventually arrives at 9:00 pm. Thank God ... it's a girl, she's perfect and we are happy. Mom really needs to rest now.

I cradle my baby girl in the silence of the nursery until they tell me it's time to go. She's so tiny, so helpless that I want to hold her and protect her against everything in the world that can harm her. I am in the presence of a miracle and I feel my eyes fill with tears.

I know now that Christmas can come at any time and that year it came in May. ■

- Might we not be reminded of God's purpose, as expressed in Mary's song, to scatter the proud and bring down the powerful, to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things? [Luke 1:51-53]
- Might we not be reminded of Jesus' words as he took a child by his side: "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me"? [Luke 9:48]
- Might we not truly realize that we honour God when we honour the powerless and fragile ones in the world, when in the name of Christ we bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners? [Luke 4:18]

We see a child — our own child, a newly baptized child, a neighbour's child, a poor child, a refugee child — and want to make the world a better place for that child. When God is a child we *know* that the world can be a better place. That is why God came to earth in Jesus Christ, to overcome the darkness with light, to show that love is stronger than hate and even than death.

"When God is a child," we know that a new day has begun and our hope for the future is assured. God incarnate in a child evokes gladness and wonder. In a world often ugly and frightening, we are given beauty and delight, a "garland instead of ashes," a reason to celebrate life itself. ■

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Iona MacLean is a Presbyterian minister serving in Pictou, Nova Scotia. Reprinted from *The Catalyst*, Citizens for Public Justice. Used with permission.



# Where the word becomes flesh

**B**ethlehem — not the place you would normally start from, not your usual entry into Catholic Education. Isn't Christmas time-out from school — a welcome break from "Do we have to go to school today?"

Maybe it's time-out to stand back and ask, "What is Catholic Education really all about?" and in the process discover that Bethlehem — "the house of bread" — gives us much food for thought. *Build Bethlehem Everywhere* is an unusual title for a book on Catholic Education — until one reads through it and discovers it opens unexpected insights into this topic.

Author, Erik Riechers, may or may not have come across William Kurelek's two questions about Christmas: "If it happened there why not here? If it happened then why not now?" Like Kurelek, he believes that Bethlehem is not just in the past, not just part of one hectic season, but takes place all year round.

He writes, "It opens to us the God possibilities of our daily grind. It enables the ordinary to speak to us of God and this makes the ordinary the place where God can be found." What was more ordinary than Bethlehem? I am reminded of Andrew Greeley's opinion: "Maybe half our heritage is transmitted to children around the crib at Christmas."

The "house of bread" links Christmas and Holy Thursday and all the in-between meals where Jesus was present. If



"Maybe half our heritage is transmitted to children around the crib at Christmas."

**Andrew Greeley**

We must speak of the God who dwells in tents, tenements, trailers and townhouses with the same frequency as we speak of his presence in our tabernacles. Tell the next generation the Good News of the God who is as familiar with the smell of TV dinners as with the aroma of incense.

Jesus is found in jeopardy: Our own quest for the Christ must take us to those in jeopardy.



something so ordinary as bread is God-revealing, how about wine, water, oil, fire, stories, songs and symbols? Do they speak to us of God? How about maple trees, playing children, giggling teenagers doing the same?

Riechers encourages us to look within our human experience for the in-breaking of God. "We must speak of the God who dwells in tents, tenements, trailers and townhouses with the same frequency as we speak of his presence in our tabernacles. Tell the next generation the Good News of the God who is as familiar with the smell of TV dinners as with the aroma of incense."

### The word becomes flesh

Riechers encourages us to "break the word open for our children ... so that they might see all the places in their lives where the word of the printed page wants to become flesh in their actions, behaviour and choices."

Teachers, parents, priests are not just mouthpieces for what theologians wrote. Their challenge is to pass on a living word — "this means something to me." Only then will religious information become religious formation. Only then will words become flesh.

"Our love needs a little flesh: we teach the young to show a fleshed love — in the cards they write, the meals they prepare for one another, the flowers they send, the gifts they bestow, the caresses they offer and the tears they wipe away."

### "Bethlehem"

Bethlehem, where the Word became flesh, pushes us to "complement rather than contradict, be in dialogue rather than diatribe, be in harmony and reject harassment,



The ordinary speaks to us of God  
Bread broken reveals Christ  
crucified. Wine, water, oil, fire,  
stories, songs and symbols can  
speak to us of God.

Scour the Nativity scene  
all you like, but you will  
never find a fully prepared  
person in it, no matter  
how hard you try.

Bethlehem is the place where we  
are welcomed with our blemishes,  
flaws and weaknesses, and where  
all that is tarnished within us still  
finds itself embraced.

Christmas challenges us to discover the face of Christ  
In each brother or sister that we greet  
In each friend whose hand we shake  
In each beggar who asks for bread  
In each worker who wants to exercise the right to join a union  
In each farm worker who looks for work in our fields.

If we see Christ in their faces,  
Then it will be impossible  
To rob them, to cheat them, to deny them their rights.  
They are Christ and whatever is done to them  
Christ will take as done to himself.  
This is the meaning of Christmas:  
Christ living among us.

**Oscar Romero**

enjoy diversity without encouraging division, heal rather than hurt.”

Bethlehem reminds us that “we can’t cuddle with Christ and shut out the poor, we can’t draw away from the sick and suffering, the elderly and the ill, the most vulnerable of the world.”

Bethlehem has no closed door, no door at all: “We open wide the doors through kindness, consideration, compassion, attentive care, and tender love. We shut the doors through cruelty, neglect, bitterness, and an unloving attitude. These keep the stranger from knocking, and give the unwanted guest every reason to vacate the premises.”

Bethlehem teaches us to “look for Christ in unsuspected places: in a stable, consorting with peasant types; in jeopardy: barely born, he is already hated by Herod, who uses his guests to hunt down the Messiah, disguising his intentions as homage when his heart is set on homicide. Our own quest for Jesus must take us to those in jeopardy and obscurity. Jerusalem is the city where the action is happening, but Bethlehem is the city of his coming. Hay does not constitute the normal bedding material for kings.”

“In Catholic Education we open up the hearts of our students to find Christ in thousands of places where society and culture will not go, but where Christ most assuredly can be found.”

Bethlehem exhorts us to “be open to the modern world, to the culture, to the world that surrounds us ... We desire to teach all the children that pass through our door ... to be inclusive, not exclusive, to leave every table together.”

Bethlehem implores Catholic Education to “hear the human cry to belong, to be needed and respected ... The worst of all possible scenarios is to be lost, and to realize that no one is coming to look for you.

“The aim of our Catholic schools must always be to ensure that no matter how lost our youth may have become, as long as we have breath to draw, we will never stop looking for them.”

## **“Go forth and build Bethlehem everywhere”**

In Bethlehem you will never find a fully prepared person, no matter how hard you try. There are no Pharisees, Sadducees or other religious experts at the scene. You have Mary surprised by the angel’s greeting, Joseph who had contemplated quietly dismissing her, shepherds who are part of the religiously unwashed and foreign non-believers.

“All men and women engaged in Catholic Education have arrived with more worry and weariness than they wanted to bring. We have come like the original cast of characters.”

Bethlehem is the place where we are welcomed with our blemishes, flaws and weaknesses. The invitation has been made out to the weak and the wounded ... the clean and the strong are nowhere to be seen.

“Go forth and build Bethlehem everywhere”:

Create places where God can be encountered as the one who welcomes our weakness.

Parents: when their children don’t make them proud, parents can still make them welcome.

Spouses and friends: sit down to coffee, reconcile differences, forgive transgressions, join hands in friendship and love.

Living with the sick and suffering: hold their hands, welcome them to our time, our love and our concern. Where tears hold sway, wipe them.

Church: Call others back to a people, a God and a Church that will welcome their weakness.

Every school we have ever built must become “Bethlehem.” ■

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Bethlehem all year round: all are welcome

# Christmas lasts forever

Deirdre McLoughlin, Lay Spiritan

As a 12-year-old during the great depression, the late William Kurelek had a number of Nativity dreams, each involving Christ being born in different places in the far North of Canada. Each dream ended with the questions.

“If it happened there, why not here?”

“If it happened then, why not now?”

How would we respond if today we were approached as Mary was? She was a very young woman with a deep faith. The angel Gabriel had shocked her and waited for her answer “behold the handmaid the Lord be it done unto me according to thy word.” She moved with trepidation into the uncertainty of her answer. Mary had freewill as we do, she was not forced to say yes, she could have made all sorts of excuses, but her faith, her yes were given with courage and freedom.

Jesus is born, her world forever changed. Karl Rabner exults “Light the candles, it is Christmas and Christmas lasts forever!”

We are all accepted at Bethlehem, just as we are, warts, imperfections and all. Our sense of awe and wonder is awakened as we observe the motley crew gathered around the crib in the stable, everyone welcomed and accepted, the baby lying in the hay, the homeless couple, shepherds unwashed, foreign visitors bearing gifts, cows and sheep with warm breath, all included: God in all.

One night several years ago Lay Spiritans were gathered in Ashling House in Toronto. The phone rang and a friend from a far Northern Reserve was calling from the Toronto bus station. She sounded scared admitting she did not know what to

do. She and eight members of her family had just got off the bus after a thirty hour journey. They thought they could connect with a bus to Guelph where they would visit their son, brother, father, uncle, who was in jail for murder. The last bus had left already. A short discussion ensued with the community and within ten minutes two cars were on the way to meet

the travelers. The positively exhausted crew, ranging in age from 7–64, were warmly welcomed, fed and bedded down for the night.

It was in the small hours of the morning, everything was quiet and as I lay awake I had an overwhelming sense of peace and gratitude that we had been able to welcome our Ojibway friends. Taking them to the bus for Guelph the next morning, the 64-year-old grandmother told me that if we had not been

there they would have had to skip Guelph and go back home at once — they only had enough money for one night and their bus tickets.

The wonderful storyteller John Shea says that “the wood of the crib is in the wood of the cross”, as we attempt to recognize the inclusivity of the Nativity, to be open and faith-filled as Mary, to answer yes and move forward into the uncertainty of our answer. We will ponder much in our hearts. Following Christ is accepting the cross. This is a theme that is stressed over and over. We are Christ filled and searching like the Magi where we must go, how we should live, observing what is happening around us. Our spiritual journey is gradually awakening to what is already there and often begins as a little child when we stare in wonder at the Nativity scene.

If it happened there, why not here?

If it happened then, why not now? ■

Three wise men  
One dark like me –  
Part of His  
Nativity.

Langston Hughes